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ABSTRACT

This digest focuses on foreign language instruction at the middle school level. In general, middle school foreign language programs have received relatively little attention. However, the increased emphasis within the field on longer sequences of instruction, combined with the conversion of junior high schools to middle schools has necessitated a renewed vision of how foreign languages are taught at the middle school level. This digest focuses on this view to the future by considering the following: (1) middle school philosophy and organization and the foreign language program; (2) interdisciplinary units and the foreign language curriculum (thematic units, curricular connections, thinking skills development); (3) middle school foreign language learners; (4) middle school strategies; and (5) curriculum and materials for the middle school. (VWL)

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Digest

February 1996

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Middle Schools and Foreign Languages: A View for the Future

Myriam Met, Montgomery County (MD) Public Schools

This Digest is based on a chapter from *Foreign Language Learning: The Journey of a Lifetime* (R. Donato and R.M. Terry, Eds.). The book is part of the ACTFL Foreign Language Education Series and is available from National Textbook Company, Lincolnwood, IL.

During the last two decades, active innovation has characterized the design and implementation of foreign language instruction in the elementary grades. In this same period, serious steps have been taken to improve secondary foreign language programs through a communicative approach to language instruction. This shift to an orientation toward proficiency, particularly at the high school level, has had widespread implications for what is taught and how. In contrast, middle school foreign language programs have received relatively little attention. Increasing emphasis on early and long sequences of instruction in a foreign language, combined with the impact of the conversion of junior high schools to middle schools, necessitates that we take a new look at how foreign languages are taught at the middle school level. Foreign language instruction in middle schools will be critical to the success of long sequences in the coming years, yet little of the foreign language professional literature has addressed practices appropriate to the middle level.

Middle School Philosophy and Organization and the Foreign Language Program

Philosophy. Central to the middle school philosophy is the belief that middle school is not merely a continuation of elementary school, but rather a unique entity with a mission of its own. Middle school philosophy also views early adolescence as a time of exploration. In an attempt to design middle school curricula around the developmental needs of students, the role of exploratory courses has gained wider support among educators, including an increased interest in foreign language exploratory courses. Such courses can play an important role in the foreign language sequence, but many issues remain to be addressed. Within the foreign language professional community, there is debate over the role, value, and desired length of exploratory programs. For contrasting viewpoints, see Kennedy & De Lorenzo (1994) and Knop & Sandrock (1994). For students entering middle school with previous foreign language experience at the elementary school, there have been questions regarding how and whether students should enter the exploratory program, yet still be given opportunities to continue foreign language study in an articulated, sequenced course. In some areas, administrators have interpreted middle school philosophy to exclude sequential courses or have substituted exploratory programs for long-standing sequential programs.

Organization. Unlike elementary schools, where students spend most of their day with one teacher, or high schools, where students follow individual schedules with six or seven teachers a day, middle schools are most often organized around interdisciplinary teams. Teams usually consist of four or five teachers who serve 100-200 students. Generally, the core team consists of teachers of mathematics, science, social studies, and English/reading/language arts. These teams meet daily to plan and deliver instruction to meet the requirements of the curriculum. Often, foreign language teachers are not included in the team, and many feel excluded from the heart of the school's mission. Some schools have worked to rectify this problem by including foreign language teachers as part of the core team.

Interdisciplinary Units and the Foreign Language Curriculum

Interdisciplinary instruction is increasingly popular at the middle school level because of growing recognition that learning is improved when students are able to understand the underlying relationships that connect what they are taught from one class period to the next. When objectives and content can be integrated, it is likely that greater student learning will be attained. Among the strategies for integrating instruction in different disciplines are thematic units, curricular connections, and thinking skills development.

Thematic Units. In this approach, the most common in middle schools today, all teachers on the team organize the content and skills of their discipline around a predetermined theme. Team-wide thematic units have caused concern for teachers who see certain themes as incongruent with the objectives of their discipline. This is particularly true in subjects such as mathematics and foreign languages, where teachers tend to view their objectives as sequential and hierarchical, with little flexibility about what should be taught and when. Nonetheless, many creative teachers are finding ways to contribute to thematic units.

Curricular Connections. Teachers can make connections when two or more disciplines coincide. For example, Spanish teachers may teach certain culture objectives when social studies teachers are working on a unit on Latin America. The teachers may agree to teach their individual yet complementary units at the same time, or they may plan jointly to ensure mutual reinforcement and enrichment.

While curricular connections are apparent in some subjects, others are less obvious. Many innovative foreign language teachers are creating curricular connections as a viable approach to interdisciplinary instruction. For example, to connect foreign language and mathematics objectives, students who are working on a food unit in French can calculate the average and median price per pound of meat by comparing prices in grocery ads.

Thinking Skills Development. Teachers from two or more disciplines may focus on teaching students designated learning strategies or thinking skills as part of the content of each discipline. For example, both foreign language and English teachers can use a process approach to writing to ensure that students draw on the same skills and strategies when composing in either language.

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Middle School Foreign Language Learners

Middle school students are characterized by a number of developmental changes–physical, social, emotional, and cognitive. These changes and the feelings they bring about have implications for foreign language instruction. Great care should be exercised in activities that require students to generate physical descriptions or comparisons. Students may feel awkward about their appearance, may be reluctant to stand before the class for individual presentations, and should be allowed more sheltered opportunities such as small group or student-teacher interaction. The need for movement necessitates activities that physically engage students. Hands-on materials and manipulatives provide opportunities for movement while addressing the needs of kinesthetic and tactile learners. Group work allows students to move about the room. In middle school classrooms, it is not unusual to see small groups of students stretched out or seated on the floor.

Piaget has suggested that the middle years are the time children move from the stage of concrete to formal operations. How new concepts are acquired will be influenced by maturational development. The difficulty many middle school students experience in mastering abstract grammar concepts may not be as much a reflection of aptitude as of cognitive maturity. These students will benefit more from concrete experiences, such as vocabulary presented through direct experiences, manipulation of real objects, and pictures, all set in a meaningful context.

Middle School Strategies

Curriculum trends across disciplines affect instructional strategies for teaching foreign languages in middle schools. Two important trends are performance-based instruction and constructivism.

Performance-Based Instruction. This type of instruction focuses on what students can do with what they know. The proficiency movement, which has driven foreign language reform in the last decade, is performance based. In middle school foreign language settings, classroom activities that engage students in meaningful and purposeful language use should predominate.

Anecdotal reports suggest that in middle schools where a proficiency-based approach is used, a larger and more diverse population of students is experiencing success. In one school district where proficiency-based curriculum instruction was introduced in the 1980s, enrollment of middle school students has climbed dramatically. In 1993, the National Council of State Supervisors of Foreign Languages adopted a position statement on foreign language programs. The appendix of the document advocates proficiency-oriented language instruction, calling for proficiency-oriented goals and techniques and proficiency-based curricula, including content-based teaching.

Constructivism. Constructivist theory emphasizes the importance of the learner's active construction of knowledge and the interplay between new knowledge and the learner's prior knowledge. Effective foreign language instruction at the middle school level will provide opportunities for students to construct and create their own understanding of how to make meaning from what they hear and read, and how they use their understanding to construct and create their own meanings in speech and writing. In order to construct knowledge of a new language, students need exposure to the target language. This exposure makes the transmission of meaning in second languages accessible and understandable to students. Internalizing the relationship between meaning and the forms used to convey it is essential for production; students cannot spontaneously produce language they do not understand. In the first phase of internalization, students learn to understand what is heard by matching meaning with language. Learners need to notice features in the *input* (vocabulary, syntax, discourse markers) to which they can assign meanings. Through a carefully implemented sequence of instructional activities, students can be assisted to move through the construction of meaning. Students should be provided with comprehensible examples of new structures as used in authentic situations and extended spoken and written texts, as well as many opportunities to hear, understand, and match language with meaning.

Curriculum and Materials for the Middle School

Materials for middle school foreign language programs should reflect the developmental characteristics of learners and be consistent with current trends in instruction. Textbooks and materials should set accessible goals that provide students with a sense of accomplishment and closure. In addition:

- Materials should be age appropriate and flexible enough to accommodate the diversity found in middle schools.
- Materials need to reflect a variety of learning styles, interests, abilities, attention spans, and backgrounds.
- Activities should reinforce positive aspects of students' self-image.
- Learning should be made concrete through contextualized vocabulary presentations and the extensive use of visuals such as pictured vocabulary, videos, and charts.
- Exercises and activities should involve hands-on student involvement, whether through the use of manipulatives or other forms of physical interaction.
- Instructional experiences should emphasize the development of understanding rather than the decontextualized memorization of vocabulary lists and grammar rules.
- Abstract concepts should be made accessible through concrete experience and scaffolding of complex tasks.
- Interaction with peers should be integrated into these materials to provide for the cognitive and social benefits of pair and group work.
- Materials should be seen by students as relevant to their interests.

Conclusion

Middle schools are an important new direction in the education of adolescents. It is important that foreign language educators understand the philosophy of middle schools, their organization, and their instructional underpinnings. Given the new national foreign language standards, and the need for longer sequences of foreign language instruction, recognizing the role of foreign languages in the middle school will be more important than ever.

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